

Use of tenses

Talking about the present

The present progressive is used:

- to talk about an action that is happening now, or about a temporary situation:
 - ▶ We're just **having** breakfast.
 - ▶ What **are** you **reading**?
 - ▶ She's not **listening** to me.
 - ▶ They're **spending** a year in Spain.
- to talk about something that is not yet finished, even if you are not doing it at the moment when you are talking:
 - ▶ I'm **learning** Italian.
 - ▶ She's **writing** a novel.
- with **always**, to talk about something that happens often, and that you find annoying:
 - ▶ He's always **asking** silly questions.
 - ▶ They're always **coming** round here to borrow something.

NOTE Some verbs are not used in the progressive tenses, for example **need, want, know, agree, seem, appear, understand, smell, hear**, etc. These verbs refer to a state, not an action.

- ▶ I **need** some new shoes.
- ▶ He **wants** to go home.
- ▶ Do you **know** Tania Smith?
- ▶ They **love** Japanese food.
- ▶ She **hates** her job.

NOTE Other verbs are used in the present progressive when they refer to an action, and the present simple when they refer to a state:

- ▶ He's **tasting** the soup.
- ▶ The soup **tastes** salty.
- ▶ She's **being** difficult again.
- ▶ She's a difficult child.
- ▶ What **are** you **thinking** about?
- ▶ Do you **think** I should leave?

The present simple is used:

- to talk about a permanent situation or something that is always true:
 - ▶ He **lives** in Spain.
 - ▶ Does he **work** in a factory?
 - ▶ Insects **have** six legs.
 - ▶ What temperature **does** water **boil** at?
- to talk about things that happen regularly:
 - ▶ She **leaves** for school at 8 o'clock.
 - ▶ We **don't** often **go** out for a meal.
 - ▶ What time **do** you **catch** the bus?

Talking about the past

The past simple is used:

- to talk about an action that took place in the past:
 - ▶ He **got** up, **paid** the bill and **left**.
 - ▶ I **didn't** read the letter, I just **gave** it to Lee.
 - ▶ What **did** you **say**?
- NOTE** Often a specific time in the past is mentioned:
 - ▶ **Did** you **speak** to Amy yesterday?
- to talk about a state that continued for some time, but that is now finished:
 - ▶ I **went** to school in Scotland.
 - ▶ **Did** she really **work** there for ten years?
- to talk about actions that happened regularly in the past:
 - ▶ I often **played** tennis with her. She always **won**.
 - ▶ They never **went** to the cinema when they lived in the country.

The present perfect is used:

- to talk about something that happened during a period of time that is not yet finished:
 - ▶ The train **has been** late three times this week.
 - ▶ He still **hasn't** visited her.
- when the time in the past is not mentioned, or is not important:
 - ▶ He's **written** a book.
 - ▶ We've **bought** a new computer.
- when the action finished in the past, but the effect is still felt in the present:
 - ▶ He's **lost** his calculator (and he still hasn't found it).
- with **for** and **since** to show the duration of an action or state up until the present:
 - ▶ I **have worked** here since 1998.
 - ▶ She **hasn't bought** any new clothes for years.
- in British English, with **just, ever, already** and **yet**:
 - ▶ I've just **arrived**.
 - ▶ **Have** you ever **been** here before?
 - ▶ He's already **packed** his suitcases.
 - ▶ **Haven't** you **finished** yet?
- NOTE** In informal American English the past simple can be used with **just, already** and **yet**:
 - ▶ He already **packed** his suitcases.
 - ▶ **Didn't** you **finish** yet?

The present perfect progressive is used:

- with **for** and **since** to talk about an activity that started in the past and is still happening:
 - ▶ *I've been working since eight o'clock.*
 - ▶ *He's been learning English for several years.*
- to talk about an activity that has finished, but whose results are visible now:
 - ▶ *My hands are dirty because I've been gardening.*

The past progressive is used:

- to talk about an action that was in progress at a particular time in the past:
 - ▶ *What were you doing in the summer of 1999?*
 - ▶ *Was it raining when you left home?*
- to talk about something that was already in progress when something else happened. (You use the past simple for the action that interrupts it):
 - ▶ *The doorbell rang while they were having breakfast.*

NOTE As with the present progressive, this tense cannot be used with 'state' verbs:

- ▶ *The fresh bread **smelled** wonderful* (NOT *was smelling*).

The past perfect is used:

- to talk about something that happened before another action in the past:
 - ▶ *I **had** already **met** Ed before he came to Bath.*
 - ▶ *When I got to the station, the train **had left**.*

The past perfect progressive is used:

- with **for** or **since** to talk about an activity that started at a time further back in the past than something else:
 - ▶ *She **hadn't been living** there very long when she met Mark.*
- to talk about an activity that had a result in the past:
 - ▶ *My hands were dirty because I **had been** gardening.*

Talking about the future

There are several ways of talking about the future.

The future simple

(will with the infinitive) is used:

- to talk about a decision that you make as you are speaking:
 - ▶ *'It's cold in here.' 'OK, I'll close the window.'*
 - ▶ *I'll have the salad, please.*
- to talk about what you know or think will happen in the future (but not about your own intentions or plans):
 - ▶ *Her mother **will be** ninety next week.*
 - ▶ ***Will** he **pass** the exam, do you think?*
 - ▶ *This job **won't take** long.*

- for requests, promises and offers:

- ▶ ***Will** you **buy** some bread on your way home?*
- ▶ ***We'll be** back early, don't worry.*
- ▶ ***I'll help** you with your homework.*

However, other tenses and expressions are also used to express a 'future' idea.

The present progressive is used:

- to talk about future plans where the time is mentioned:
 - ▶ *He's **flying** to Japan in August.*
 - ▶ *What **are** you **doing** this evening?*
 - ▶ *I'm not **starting** my new job till next Monday.*

Be going to with the infinitive is used:

- to talk about what you intend to do in the future:
 - ▶ *I'm **going to phone** Michael tonight.*
 - ▶ *What **are** you **going to do** when you leave school?*

About to with the infinitive is used:

- to talk about the very near future:
 - ▶ *Go and ask him quickly.*
 - ▶ *He's **about to go** out.*

The present simple is used:

- to refer to a future time after **when**, **as soon as**, **before**, **until**, etc.:
 - ▶ *Ring me as soon as you **hear** any news.*
 - ▶ *I'll look after Jo until you **get** back.*
 - ▶ *You'll recognize the street when you **see** it.*
- to talk about future plans where something has been officially arranged, for example on a timetable or programme:
 - ▶ *We **leave** Palma at 10 and **arrive** in Luton at 12.30.*
 - ▶ *School **starts** on 9 September.*

The future progressive is used:

- to talk about actions that will continue for a period of time in the future:
 - ▶ *I'll **be waiting** near the ticket office.*
 - ▶ *I'll **be wearing** a green hat.*
 - ▶ *This time next week you'll **be relaxing** in the sun!*

- to ask somebody about their plans or intentions:

- ▶ *How many nights **will** you **be staying**?*
- ▶ ***Will** you **be flying** back or **going** by train?*

The future perfect or

the future perfect progressive is used:

- to talk about the duration of something that you will be looking back on at a particular time in the future:
 - ▶ *They'll **have lived** here for four years in May.*
 - ▶ *She'll **have been working** here for a year in October.*